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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 GUATEMALA 000429

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STATE PASS TO USTR, NSC FOR DAN FISK, DOD FOR ROGER
PARDO-MAUER

E.O. 12958: DECL: 03/01/2016

TAGS: [PREL](#) [EAID](#) [SMIG](#) [CVIS](#) [ETRD](#) [MASS](#) [SNAR](#) [GT](#)

SUBJECT: GOG WEAKNESSES AND U.S. SUPPORT

REF: A. 05 GUATEMALA 2395

[1](#)B. GUATEMALA 428

Classified By: Ambassador James M. Derham for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

[1](#)1. (C) Summary: The February 23 announcement that TPS (Temporary Protected Status) has been extended for citizens of El Salvador, Honduras and Nicaragua prompted immediate critical reaction from President Berger, Vice President Stein and Foreign Minister Briz, culminating in a reproachful meeting with the Ambassador and DCM February 28. While we believe we have been able to manage the TPS issue, the GOG's sharp, almost panicky reaction brought into relief a larger issue: The growing sense in Guatemala that the USG takes the GOG for granted, is unable or unwilling to support a friend and ally and is, by extension, leaving the door open for a populist government with questionable personal and financial ties to win office in 2007. For all of the personal politics and drama that characterize the Berger government, we do see some substance to their misgivings. End summary.

[1](#)2. (C) Although we have been clear with the GOG for months that TPS was a non-starter, the February 23 announcement of that program's extension for Salvadorans, Hondurans and Nicaraguans provoked a major twitch in Guatemala's body politic. Immediately after the media announcement of the TPS extension, President Berger called Foreign Minister Briz, who then called the Embassy 3 times (from Tokyo where it was between 0230 and 0730). Vice President Stein called us only once, but it was a lengthy call. Briz's calls carried a hint of desperation ("...what can I do to fix this?") while Stein's call hinted at anger ("...I'd better stay away from the media today"). On February 27 Briz called the Ambassador to a meeting at the Foreign Ministry to discuss TPS.

[1](#)3. (C) On February 28, President Berger summoned the Ambassador to a meeting with Vice President Stein and Foreign Minister Briz to discuss TPS and the broader state of our bilateral relationship. Berger handed the Ambassador a letter for President Bush in which he expresses his dismay and concern that, in spite of Hurricane Stan, Guatemalans remain excluded from TPS. (Translated text in ref B; original coming via pouch). The hour-long meeting was best characterized by Berger's repeated statement that he was upset about TPS and concerned about our broader relationship. Our conversations with Berger, Stein, Briz and Vice Minister of Foreign Affairs Cabrera have taken the edge off the TPS issue for now and the media attention to the TPS announcement has been limited, although the GOG told us they will continue to push for TPS or some other form of improving the lot of its citizens in the U.S.

[1](#)4. (C) It is clear from this flurry of telephone conversations and face-to-face meetings that the GOG's sharp reaction to the TPS announcement is symptomatic of a larger problem: The perceived asymmetry in our bilateral relationship. The Guatemalan perspective is that, in spite of their support of U.S.-promoted policies and programs, the USG has not reciprocated with significant support for the Berger Administration on its most pressing issues: TPS, CAFTA implementation, and military/security assistance. Furthermore, Berger and company view our declining development assistance and our inability to make Guatemala eligible for a Millennium Challenge Compact as punishment for the sins of their predecessors, the kleptocratic Portillo government. The GOG also believes that their closest Central American neighbors (El Salvador, in particular) receive better treatment from the USG than does Guatemala. For them, this adds up to evidence that the U.S. takes Guatemala for granted, and generates a popular view that the Berger administration is too weak to advance its interests with the U.S.

[1](#)5. (C) The perceived USG indifference to Guatemala is troubling to the Berger administration and weakens their ability to govern. As they see it, clear USG support would help them confront the growing threat of organized crime, better manage their fractious intra- and inter-party politics, and build popular sentiment that there is a pay-off for sticking with orthodox economic policies, fighting crime

and corruption, respecting international legal and human rights norms, and continuing with the process of building workable democratic institutions. Without USG support and rewards for the pro-U.S. policies they are pursuing, Berger and company fear that the 2007 elections will be fertile ground for populist candidates with questionable personal and financial ties who will exploit the current government's weaknesses.

16. (C) Embassy appreciates that the Berger government's perspective on the relationship with the U.S. is not balanced and we have emphasized in private and in public the range and depth of our cooperative efforts. We have also made the point that the government (all three branches), the private sector and civil society need to do a better job in assuming responsibility and working to address the challenges that beset Guatemala. We also recognize that the personalities involved here (an insecure Foreign Minister, a left-of-center Vice President in a right-of-center government, and a President who quickly shifts his attention from one issue to the next generate false emergencies). We also understand that there are no easy overrides in Washington to accommodate Guatemalan desiderata on issues such as migration, CAFTA implementation and assistance. Nevertheless, fair or unfair, the Berger government's perception is that they have not been served well by their alignment with the U.S. Embassy has no quick fix to propose, but does want to raise the alert that this perception is a reality and may well have an unhelpful influence on the 2007 presidential elections.

DERHAM